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It begins—digitizing the Rocky Flats Collection

Photo Caption: A blue truck delivers a load of hardcopy data to RLUOB, the Radiological Laboratory Utility Office Building. Teams in the RLUOB have already started to create electronic files from this mountain of information known as the Rocky Flats Collection.

From 1952 to 1989, the Rocky Flats Plant near Golden, Colorado, manufactured plutonium cores—the nuclear weapon pits that still exist in the nation's nuclear weapons stockpile. Not only did Rocky Flats personnel produce these plutonium cores, they also documented every facet of this highly technical process. Moreover, Rocky Flats was a premier center for actinide research and development, with these data as relevant today as they were yesterday.

In 1989, Rocky Flats shut down. As a result, some of the pit-production and actinide research knowledge was boxed and sent to a vault at the Denver Federal Center (home to 28 different agencies in 44 federal buildings) for storage. That is, until now.

In recent months, the Laboratory received hundreds of boxes from the center. In these boxes are what amounts to a huge data dump of hard copies of reports, laboratory notebooks, technical procedures, technical photos and illustrations and other records necessary to effectively carry out pit production and actinide science.

These new documents join an already substantial amount of material from Rocky Flats that is part of the National Security Research Center's (NSRC) Rocky Flats Collection. The NSRC is the Lab's classified library.

Over the past several weeks, various teams from across the Lab, led by Weapons Research Services (WRS) and the NSRC, came together at a vault located at the Radiological Laboratory Utility Office Building. There was a sense of excitement in the air as team members began to look through the Rocky Flats Collection and formulate plans to establish a new lab to digitize it to make the content easier to access.

“These teams have made substantial progress in establishing this digitizing lab at TA-55 and getting the Rocky Flats Digitization Project off the ground,” said Rachel Waggoner, Special Project Lead for WRS and the NSRC. “We’ve experienced numerous challenges, and we do have a long way to go in digitizing the Rocky Flats Collection. However, the teams worked hard to overcome these initial hurdles, and we are now prepared to digitize these records as quickly as possible.”

The principal objective of digitizing the Rocky Flats Collection is to transfer all hardcopy media into electronic formats so they can be more easily accessed and used by LANL’s Weapons Production staff, as well as others in the Weapons Program, to help meet critical pit production milestones. The digital formats not only make the data easier to store but they also make it readily accessible and searchable.

The NSRC’s new digitizing lab at TA-55 uses high-speed equipment specifically designed to handle large volumes of material. The new digitizing lab also incorporates advanced processes and new training to digitize efficiently and securely while maintaining a high degree of quality control.

Riz Ali, Director of the NSRC, stated, “The equipment, procedures and training we’re using at the TA-55 digitizing lab for the new Rocky Flats Collection are modeled on extensive research the NSRC conducted over the past two years. We visited and held detailed discussions with large-scale document digitizing operations in the Federal Government, such as the National Reconnaissance Office; industry leaders, such as Iron Mountain; and even Presidential Libraries, such as the George H.W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum.”

“Our staff of archivists and librarians has extensive experience in digitizing and cataloging assortments of various media types to make the items retrievable,” added Ali. “The new Rocky Flats Collection will be uploaded into an online repository for easy access to authorized users.”

Early career Laboratory staff can thus study well-implemented paths for how things were done at Rocky Flats, a facility known for its efficient production techniques. The new items from Rocky Flats helps fill the knowledge gap, enabling a new generation of technicians, scientists and engineers to better understand and carry out the process of pit production to maintain the national security of the United States.

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